

**“The Happiness of ‘Slight Superiority’”:  
Kierkegaard and Nietzsche on Resentment**

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*My aim in this essay is to pair Kierkegaard with the German-born philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900). I am particularly concerned to juxtapose their complementary investigations into the etiology and operation of resentment, which both thinkers identified as exerting a powerfully retardant force within the bourgeois societies of late modern European culture. Indeed, both were concerned to demonstrate the extent to which the corrosive power of resentment had transformed the religious injunction to “love thy neighbor” into a culturally sponsored program to “beggar thy neighbor.”*

*The result of this pairing, or so I hope to demonstrate, is a productive division of philosophical labor: From Nietzsche, on the one hand, Kierkegaard's readers may gain a clear sense of how a community founded on resentment may accommodate “healthy” expressions of comparative advantage and relative superiority. Even when exaggerated and amplified, however, these expressions pose no threat to the conservative, contractionary structure of the ethical life of the community in question. In particular, as we shall see, Nietzsche's account of resentment may explain that, and why, the seemingly daring meditation conducted by Johannes de silentio in Fear and Trembling yields such a muddled and unsatisfying conclusion.*

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From Kierkegaard, on the other hand, Nietzsche’s readers may gain a usefully illustrative sketch of an individual divided irreparably against himself, laboring in the thrall of a social role and station that he can neither fully embrace nor finally renounce. The individual in question is none other than Johannes *de silentio*, the pseudonymous author and presumed narrator of *Fear and Trembling*. Kierkegaard’s sketch of Johannes invites us to assign a distinctly human face—or, at any rate, a distinctly human psyche—to the enigmatic figure of the ascetic priest. And although it may be tempting to equate the ascetic priest, as presented by Nietzsche, with the knight of morality, as presented by Kierkegaard, especially with respect to the complex role each plays in the community he is obliged to tend, it is sufficient for my purposes to note the family resemblance that obtains between these two pathological types.

## Part One: Introducing the Knight of Morality

I am particularly concerned in this essay to draw attention to Kierkegaard's use of the literary device of pseudonymous authorship for a specific diagnostic purpose—namely, to construct a psychological profile of a particular kind (or type) of modern subject.

In general, or so I wish to claim, Kierkegaard's pseudonyms represent second-order reflections of the spiritual crisis he detects, wherein the accurate diagnosis of this crisis is seen—though not by the pseudonyms themselves—to manifest and feed this crisis rather than to address or alleviate it. We often find, moreover, that Kierkegaard's pseudonyms deceive themselves about their relationship to the crisis they claim to diagnose. Rather than establish their distance from (or immunity to) the crisis in question, their common penchant for hyper-rational analysis and abstract diagnosis confirms their immersion in this crisis. That they are able to reflect on the spiritual failings of others is evidence *not* of their success in leading spiritually enriched lives, but of their failure to avoid the pandemic spiritual poverty they both expose and decry. What Kierkegaard both realizes and dramatizes, in short, is that diagnosing the spiritual illness of others, as his pseudonyms are inclined to do, can be a powerful symptom of this illness in oneself.<sup>1</sup>

We often find, moreover, that the pseudonyms unwittingly bespeak, or manifest, a structural element of the spiritual crisis they seek to document. For example, Kierkegaard employs the figure of Johannes *de silentio*, the pseudonymous author of *Fear and Trembling*, to dramatize the enduring purchase of morality, broadly construed, on the lives of educated, progressive, urbane, high-functioning, and seemingly self-possessed modern agents. Even as he belittles those who cling to the banal clichés of conventional morality, Johannes unknowingly demonstrates the extent of his own involuntary investments in the ethical sphere of existence. Despite his avowed intention to weigh the merits of a “teleological suspension of the ethical” (*FT* 54),<sup>2</sup> for example, he is able, in the end, to do no such thing. As he reaches the limits of

this thought-experiment, he recoils from the faith of Abraham and relaxes into the comprehensive totality of the ethical universal. As we shall see, the universal validity of the ethical law not only ensures the comfort, stability, and efficiency of the bourgeois society to which Johannes belongs, but also allows him to express his resentment of Abraham and anyone else who genuinely (as opposed to half-heartedly) attempts to “go further.”<sup>3</sup>

In particular, as we shall see, Johannes exemplifies a psychological type that Kierkegaard associates with a (bourgeois) culture in which one is encouraged to limit one’s sense of spiritual flourishing to the attainment and celebration of petty advantages over others. In such a culture, we learn, the emphasis is laid not on an absolute standard of excellence or flourishing, but on a comparative or relative standard. One judges one’s condition and progress, that is, by comparing oneself to others. The problem with a comparative standard of flourishing, however, is that it provides an incentive not only to build oneself up, but also to tear others down. We thus notice, for example, that Johannes regularly makes snide, offhand observations about his contemporaries, to whom he clearly believes himself superior. In addition to his potentially admirable labors of spiritual enrichment, that is, he is actively engaged in a campaign to ridicule and belittle his contemporaries.

This latter point is complicated by the likely accuracy of his observations. In other words, Johannes is clearly onto something when he rebukes his contemporaries for their materialism, their philistinism, and their breezy sense of entitlement to the faith they thoughtlessly claim for themselves. Indeed, we know from those writings to which Kierkegaard affixed his own signature—e.g., *A Literary Review*—that he shares many of the dissatisfactions voiced by Johannes.

Still, one may wonder why Johannes is so preoccupied, even obsessed, with the spiritual failings of his contemporaries. While it is no doubt true, as he alleges, that baldly asserting one’s claim to faith can be symptomatic of spiritual crisis, the same might be said of devoting one’s energies to tracking and

debunking such assertions. Indeed, he presents his own efforts at spiritual enrichment, like his silence, as belonging to the past, as if they were either completed or indefinitely suspended. In his new role, as doomsayer and scold, he concerns himself with the spiritual struggles and failings of others, to whom he favorably compares himself. Rather than attend to his own impoverished spirituality, in fact, Johannes busies himself with his occasionally insightful reckonings of the real and imagined failings of his contemporaries. In doing so, he secures for himself transient experiences of artificially enhanced passion, which he then wishfully misinterprets as signs of his surging vitality. He asserts (and mistakenly believes) that these transient bursts of passion separate him decisively from his enervated contemporaries.

For the most part, this celebration of petty advantages is either comic or pathetic. We encounter Johannes in exuberantly fine form, for example, when he skewers the pretensions and lampoons the manners of his contemporaries. But this jaunty aspect of his narration also reveals a deeper, and potentially troubling, unease. As we shall see, Johannes is not content simply to take the measure of his laughable contemporaries. He also presents himself as the measure and judge of Abraham, despite claiming, repeatedly, that the greatness of Abraham defies all human metrics. Despite failing to place Abraham in the various categories he proposes for consideration—including those of hero, ironist, knight of faith, intellectual tragic hero, etc.—Johannes nevertheless manages to invite an ethical indictment of the patriarch, who apparently failed to disclose to Isaac the true objective of their journey to Mt. Moriah. As we shall see, Johannes presents this failure as sufficient to authorize our resentment of Abraham and to renounce our allegiance to him as a moral exemplar.

Johannes thus appears in *Fear and Trembling* as what I call, though Kierkegaard does not, a *knight of morality*: Despite the various challenges he presents to the primacy of ethical universality, he reflexively defends the priority of the ethical sphere of existence and the validity of the moral law.<sup>4</sup> He does so, as we shall see, to satisfy two pathological (and uniquely modern) needs: 1) his need to be recognized as superior to his vulgar, faithless contemporaries; and 2)

his need to present himself as the measure and judge of Abraham, whose faith prevents him from enjoying the experience of happiness that awaits him and his favored readers in the revitalized ethical sphere.

In presenting Johannes as manifesting these particular needs, Kierkegaard thus exposes the extent to which the ethical sphere of existence cultivates for its laws and norms an appreciative and ultimately uncritical clientele. Despite the many material benefits it confers, we learn, the ethical sphere of existence leaves nothing to chance in securing the allegiance of its clientele: Those whom it recruits as its knightly defenders are rewarded for their fidelity with the opportunity to measure themselves against others and to mark their superiority with authorized expressions of power and violence.<sup>5</sup> As compensation for his own loyalty to the moral law, Johannes is allowed not only to rail with impunity against his dispirited contemporaries, but also to stand in judgment of Abraham, whom he dares to dislodge from the pedestal on which he stands.

## **Part Two: The Slave Revolt in Morality**

Nietzsche's influential account of *the slave revolt in morality* turns, perhaps surprisingly, on his recognition of the potentially *creative* power of resentment:

The slave revolt in morality begins when *ressentiment* itself becomes creative and gives birth to values: the *ressentiment* of natures that are denied the true reaction, that of deeds, and compensate themselves with an imaginary revenge. While every noble morality develops from a triumphant affirmation of itself, slave morality from the outset says No to what is "outside," what is "different" what is "not itself"; and *this* No is its creative deed. This inversion of the value-positing eye—this *need* to direct one's view outward instead of back to oneself—is of the essence of *ressentiment*: in order to exist, slave morality always needs a hostile external world; it needs, physiologically speaking, external stimuli in order to act at all—its action is fundamentally reaction. (GM I:10)<sup>6</sup>

Nietzsche famously neglects to offer his readers a proper definition of *ressentiment*. He also refuses, perhaps with good reason, to translate the word into his native German. Although he no doubt benefited rhetorically from the elasticity of an undefined term of apparently technical application, his readers are understandably keen to receive a more precise formulation. For our purposes, Max Scheler's definition should suffice:

*Ressentiment* is a self-poisoning of the mind which has quite definite causes and consequences. It is a lasting mental attitude, caused by the systematic repression of certain emotions and affects which, as such, are normal components of human nature. Their repression leads to the constant tendency to indulge in certain kinds of value delusions and corresponding value judgments. The emotions and affects primarily concerned are revenge, hatred, malice, envy, the impulse to detract, and spite.<sup>7</sup>

As such, *ressentiment* names the propensity of the "slave" type to repudiate everything that it is not, as a means of generating affect and thereby distracting itself from its lack of an integrated identity. Although the "noble man" too is susceptible to *ressentiment*, in him it "consummates and exhausts itself in an immediate reaction," i.e., before it accumulates and becomes toxic to him (GM I:10).<sup>8</sup>

As is his wont, Nietzsche offers a fairly reductive physiological account of the role and utility of *ressentiment* in the vital economy of the human animal organism. His idea, in brief, is that the accumulation and explosive discharge of *ressentiment* enables suffering and otherwise impotent individuals to gain relief from their pain. In the context of developing what amounts to a pioneering diagnosis of depression, he explains,

Every sufferer instinctively seeks a cause for his suffering; more exactly, an agent<sup>9</sup>; still more specifically, a *guilty* agent who is susceptible to suffering—in short, some living thing upon which he can, under some pretext or other, vent his affects, actually or in effigy:

for the venting of his affects represents the greatest attempt on the part of the sufferer to win relief, *anesthesia*—the narcotic he cannot help desiring to deaden pain of any kind. This alone, I surmise, constitutes the actual physiological cause of *ressentiment*...: a desire to *deaden pain by means of affects*. (GM III:15)

Nietzsche thus identifies the accumulation and discharge of *ressentiment* as a natural (if crude) internal mechanism for anaesthetizing oneself. In seeking to vent their copious *ressentiment*, that is, the slaves had no reasonable expectation of actually confronting, much less prevailing over, their healthy oppressors. (As Nietzsche notes in the extracted passage above, an effigy often would suffice.) They hoped simply to deaden their pain and looked no further into their future. Their oppressors, whether real or imagined, furnished them with a proximate target and a guiding pretext for an analgesic discharge of *ressentiment*.

As we have seen, both Nietzsche and Scheler emphasize the sheer toxicity of *ressentiment*, which functions essentially as an endogenic poison. This means that even when its discharge succeeds in relieving pain, *ressentiment* debilitates and sickens the sufferer in question. As such, it can be considered a remedy or cure only in an extremely restricted sense. In short, the discharge of *ressentiment* makes no one better; it simply allows the sick to *feel* better and, so, to endure their suffering. Why, then, does Nietzsche attribute the success of the slave revolt in morality to the creative, value-generative power of *ressentiment*? Under what conditions does such a toxic affect become anything but corrosive?

According to Nietzsche, the priest accomplished this alchemical feat by redirecting (and repurposing) the slaves' abundant *ressentiment*. Prior to the priest's intervention, or so we are meant to understand, the accumulation of *ressentiment* in the lower orders of society was bothersome for the nobles and potentially fatal for the slaves. So long as the slaves vented their *ressentiment* toward the nobles, they risked either provoking a response they would not survive, or drawing attention to themselves as easy targets of retaliatory and



gratuitous abuse. As a solution to the problem of the unruly slaves, the knightly nobles appointed the priestly nobles to quell the lower orders. They were able to prevail over the priests, apparently, by virtue of their superior physical power and force, which the priestly nobles would have been foolish to test (GM I:7). This does not mean, however, that the priestly nobles accepted or reconciled themselves to their demotion to second-class status among the nobles. They seethed in silence, feeding their hatred of the knightly nobles while plotting their revenge.

Nietzsche is primarily concerned here to document the ministry conducted by one particular kind of priest: the *ascetic priest*, who persuaded the slaves to vent their *ressentiment* not toward the knightly nobles, but toward *themselves*. He did so by convincing them to find themselves responsible for their suffering and, subsequently, to implement an exacting regimen of self-surveillance (GM III:15). Scanning their barren souls for signs of unpaid debts and broken promises, the slaves acquired a knack for the kind of introspection that prepared them to cultivate the quiet virtues of patience, obedience, cooperation, and perseverance.

Under the supervision of the ascetic priest, the slaves were molded into a productive and docile social collective, which Nietzsche affectionately calls the *herd*. As members of this collective, the slaves became proficient in almsgiving, mutual aid and support, reciprocal caretaking, and various rote mechanical tasks. (Nietzsche identifies these as the “innocent” methods employed by the priest to dull the suffering of the slaves.) These miserable sufferers were thus granted the opportunity to identify themselves with the rising fortunes of the collective, which was a welcome distraction from their dim prospects as individuals.

In this form, moreover, the slaves no longer disturbed the knightly nobles, who, in turn, expressed little interest in the measures employed by the priest to quell the lower orders. Had they paid closer attention, the knightly nobles might have observed, and taken note of, the following stroke of genius on the part of the ascetic priest:

[B]y prescribing “love of the neighbor,” the ascetic priest prescribes fundamentally an excitement of the strongest, most life-affirming drive, even if in the most cautious doses—namely, of the will to power. *The happiness of “slight superiority,” involved in all doing good, being useful, helping, and rewarding, is the most effective means of consolation for the physiologically inhibited, and widely employed by them when they are well advised:* otherwise they hurt one another, obedient, of course, to the same basic instinct...With the growth of the community, a new interest grows for the individual, too, and often lifts him above the most personal element in his discontent, his aversion to himself...(GM III:18, emphasis added)

What the priest discovered, in short, is that a social collective formed and bound by (redirected) *ressentiment* may accommodate modest expenditures of the will to power, which in turn imbues the agents in question with “the happiness of ‘slight superiority’.” This means that a collective formed strictly for defensive (including self-defensive) purposes eventually may foster in its members positive feelings of attachment and accomplishment. It will do so, Nietzsche suggests, if the members of the collective are allowed (or indirectly encouraged) to look down on those whom they help and to engage in modest competition with other neighbor-lovers and almsgivers. In addition to doing good, that is, members of the collective will come to feel (relatively) good about themselves.

Prior to the redirection of their *ressentiment*, the slaves experienced their suffering as gratuitous, senseless, undeserved, and as an objection to their existence. Following the redirection of their *ressentiment*, the slaves experienced their suffering as meaningful, deserved, indicative of their core goodness, and, so, as a seduction to life. Knowing themselves to be at fault, they eagerly set out to discover the source of their suffering, which they invariably located in the animal residuum they shared in common with the knightly nobles, i.e., in their drives, impulses, passions, appetites, and affects. As they became accustomed to this ascetic regimen, their sense of their own worth, *qua* herd members, gradually acquired a positive characterization.

In re-directing the *ressentiment* of his followers, we might note, the priest simply adjusted their natural mechanism for anaesthetizing themselves. Their inward discharge of *ressentiment* served the same purpose as an outward discharge, mobilizing a “violent emotion” to “*deaden*...a tormenting, secret pain that is becoming unendurable.” The fact that the slaves were not actually to blame for their suffering posed no real problem for the priest, who apparently understood that slaves only ever sought imaginary revenge. In that event, one convincing pretext—e.g., the slaves are to blame—would be as good as another—e.g., the nobles are to blame. As we have seen, moreover, their inward discharge of *ressentiment* also served to obviate the potentially mortal risks involved in an outward discharge directed at the nobles. The slaves were better off poisoning themselves than desperately taunting the cruelty-inclined nobles.

In perfecting this adjustment in his followers, the priest also discovered that their need for anesthesia was so great that it trumped even their fear of death. Until he intervened, after all, they were fully prepared to vent their *ressentiment* against their actual oppressors, despite knowing that any such discharge would be likely to provoke a fatal, retaliatory response. The priest thus surmised that his followers would hazard their own annihilation if they believed that doing so would relieve their suffering. This means, as he no doubt observed and filed away for future reference, that they might be persuaded, under certain circumstances, to activate and express their *will to nothingness*, i.e., their will never to will again. As we shall see, this realization would eventually allow the priest to transform his peaceful ministry into a vehicle of revenge.

The significance of this achievement can scarcely be overstated. In redirecting the *ressentiment* of the slaves, the ascetic priest saved them from their own imprudent impulses, quieted their rancor, tasked them with esteem-building projects of self-improvement, and created a stable, viable collective. In doing so, of course, the priest also positioned himself to seek and gain his revenge. What the priest understood, apparently, is that *ressentiment* is always corrosive, even when redirected and repurposed in support of the day-to-day

maintenance of a docile collective. In the case of the herd, the destructive effects of redirected *ressentiment* are masked by its countervailing analgesic effects.

Thus we see that the neighbor-love prescribed by the priest and perfected by the herd is motivated by, and laced with, neighbor-contempt. For Nietzsche, of course, this constitutes no objection to the limited, contextualized practice of neighbor-love: Those sufferers who receive neighbor-love are grateful for the attention and succor, and those who bestow neighbor-love enjoy “the happiness of ‘slight superiority’” they derive from looking down on their unfortunate beneficiaries. In general, we might say, the priest’s genius lay in his knack for determining the optimal dosage of *ressentiment* and other strong affects. This is important to bear in mind, for, as we shall see, the priest eventually would have the occasion to increase the dosage and thereby deliver an ecstatic experience of happiness.

Nietzsche’s analysis is useful to us for several reasons. First of all, he explains that and how the affect of *ressentiment* may be redirected and repurposed to contribute to the formation of a stable, tranquil social collective. Second, he exposes the prescription of “neighbor-love” as a useful pretext for establishing relationships of relative or comparative advantage, which in turn facilitate the achievement of what he calls the “happiness of ‘slight superiority’.” Third, he reveals that the herd was formed to quell the rancor emanating from the unruly lower orders of an aristocratic society. As a degenerate form of social organization, that is, the herd was never meant to stage the kind of social experimentation that is most likely to contribute to the production of exotic human beings, which according to Nietzsche, is the business of politics. Fourth, Nietzsche’s analysis alerts us to the invisible role of *ressentiment* in forming and preserving the particular kind of community that has become increasingly common throughout the societies of late modern European culture. He thus positions us to understand, for example, that “the happiness of ‘slight superiority’,” which is both expressed and recommended by Johannes *de silentio*, is fully consistent with an underlying structure (and dynamic) of *ressentiment*. As we shall see, in fact, the comparative advantage Johannes

claims for himself is indicative of the conservative nature of the challenge he poses to himself and his readers.

### **Part Three: Morality and its Discontents**

Johannes *de silentio* opens *Fear and Trembling* by introducing himself to his readers. No longer able to keep his eponymous silence, he feels compelled to report the spiritual crisis at hand. In the process of introducing himself, he also contrasts himself—and, by extension, the members of his target audience—with his nameless, faceless contemporaries, whom he ridicules for their uncritical, herdlike embrace of modern ideas. His Preface in fact offers a series of witty, biting observations of his contemporaries, in comparison to whom he is meant to appear both knowing and discerning. He is in fact superior to his contemporaries, as are those readers whom his Preface is meant to flatter.

Let us begin by reviewing a representative sampling of the critical observations found in the Preface to *Fear and Trembling*:

Not only in the business world but also in the world of ideas, our age stages *ein wirklicher Ausverkauf* [a real sale]. Everything can be had at such a bargain price that it becomes a question whether there is finally anyone who will make a bid... (FT 5)

Every speculative monitor who conscientiously signals the important trends in modern philosophy, every assistant professor, tutor, and student, every rural outsider and tenant incumbent in philosophy is unwilling to stop with doubting everything but goes further... (FT 5)

In our age, everyone is unwilling to stop with faith but goes further. It perhaps would be rash to ask where they are going, whereas it is a sign of urbanity and culture for me to assume that everyone has faith, since otherwise it certainly would be odd to speak of going further... (FT 7)

The present author... writes because to him it is a luxury that is all the more pleasant and apparent the fewer there are who buy and read

what he writes. He easily envisions his fate in an age that has crossed out passion in order to serve science...(FT 7)

Respectfully, Johannes *de silentio* (FT 8)

What are we to make of this aggressively buoyant mode of self-presentation? The first thing we note is that Johannes introduces himself in the Preface as a throwback, an anachronism. By his own admission, he is a stranger to the newfangled “System” of philosophy, an aspiring poet and lyricist in an age of gossip and newspapers, a would-be knight in an increasingly cynical, post-heroic world, and an unabashed champion of passion in an age that has surrendered its depleted soul to science (FT 7-8). This is a rhetorical gambit that Kierkegaard later employs productively under his own signature in *A Literary Review*. He presents himself there as longing for the passion and drama of the Age of Revolution but obliged, sadly, to navigate the swampy decadence of the Present Age. On the strength of this distancing gesture, both Johannes and Kierkegaard lay claim to the detached, ironic perspective of the outsider inside, the droll critic who pretends not to fathom the depths of an age he knows at a glance to be superficial. At least in the case of Johannes, moreover, this claim is not simply an act or a ruse. As we shall see, Johannes is very much a throwback: As an unwitting knight of morality, he labors to enliven an age that no longer believes in passion, much less avenging knights.

Second, we might note that these humorous comparisons with his contemporaries, and with his age in general, are also meant to establish the priority of Johannes’s own critical standpoint. In short, he intimates, he is not to be confused with his dull, obtuse, lifeless contemporaries. Unlike them, he does not mistake the swindle for the bargain, the material for the spiritual, or the inessential for the essential. Nor will he suffer passing fads and fashions to distract him from what he immodestly presents as the task of a lifetime. Whereas his contemporaries claim to “go further” than faith, he knows better. The faith they claim for themselves is barely deserving of the name, much less of the distinction they attach to it. Whatever his own failings may be, that is, Johannes

does not pretend to have gone further than faith. (He repeats this claim one final time at the end of FT.) He thus endeavors to establish the priority of his critical perspective not simply (or even primarily) on its own merits, but also in comparison to the claims of those who favor modern ideas over his anachronistic preoccupation with passion, faith, spirit, and resoluteness. The problem, as we shall see, is that his efforts to discredit their perspective have a tendency to eclipse his efforts to defend his own.

Third, Johannes wishes to target a particular audience. Although he plays the Preface for laughs, exaggerating to comic effect his outsider status, he clearly wishes to distinguish himself, and decisively so, from his contemporaries. He thus tailors his introduction of himself to appeal to those readers who are similarly unfashionable, out of step with their age, suspicious of the “System,” perhaps even longing for a bygone age replete with quests, ideals, knights, heroes, lifelong trials, and enduring obligations. In other words, his is a conservative, retrospective approach, which promises to reckon the spiritual costs of a steady diet of modern ideas. Johannes thus presents himself, by way of contrast, as a man of irrepressible passion and, so, as an advertisement for the way of life to which he pledges his allegiance.

Kindred critics and fellow skeptics of modernity may be intrigued, and perhaps even flattered, to be implicated in his witty takedown of the breezy, know-it-all strivers who claim to have “gone further” than faith. Those readers who find themselves attracted by this approach also may expect to enjoy a similar position of superiority vis-à-vis their dispassionate contemporaries. Like Johannes, that is, they may revel in expressing the neighbor-contempt that funds “the happiness of ‘slight superiority’.” Readers like these, I offer, are meant to form the community that Johannes later will endeavor to mobilize.

At the same time, however, the Preface also confirms that Johannes is dependent on his lamentable contemporaries, bound up with their minimal successes and obvious failures. By virtue of his appeal to a comparative standard of spiritual flourishing, he not only needs his contemporaries, but also

needs them to remain relatively contemptible. (As Nietzsche said of the slave morality, that is, Johannes needs a “hostile external world” that he may vilify.) As he repeatedly admits, after all, he lacks the faith that he seemingly recommends to others. What *he* has to offer, in fact, is not a first-hand account or defense of the faith that his age allegedly has misplaced, but an enlightened understanding of the paradox of faith and a measured appreciation of the achievement that faith represents for others. He is content, that is, to situate himself in the *vicinity* or *neighborhood* of faith and to invite his readers to accompany him on his imaginative journeys to the scene of Abraham’s trial.<sup>10</sup> He does so, moreover, with an obvious sense of pride in the (relative) daring that supposedly launches these flights of fancy.

Of all the figures in the biblical story of the *Akedah*, in fact, the one whom Johannes most closely resembles is Eliezer, the faithful servant whom Abraham strands at the foot of Mt. Moriah. Like Eliezer, Johannes travels a long way to Moriah as he imaginatively revisits the scene of Abraham’s trial. As such, or so Johannes seems to believe, he, like Eliezer, deserves significant credit for his efforts. Although he most certainly does not accompany Abraham and Isaac to the terrifying summit of Mt. Moriah, his imaginative journeys allow him to “go further” than his contemporaries.<sup>11</sup> Unlike them, he at least takes seriously the trial, the drama, and the anxiety that he associates with the journey to Moriah. He thus looks down on his contemporaries, who, he believes, cannot place themselves in the vicinity of the faith of Abraham.

In fact, however, this is an extremely difficult case for Johannes to make. His unlikely hero Eliezer is but a servant, and he, Johannes, is but a voyeur of faith. Unable to claim for himself the faith that would separate him decisively from his contemporaries, he can at best advert to a relative superiority or comparative advantage over them. In the end, that is, Johannes represents (and defends) an option, a strategy, a way of life, a point of view, which is valuable and worthwhile only in relative terms. He is better off than his contemporaries, or so he claims, but he is not a man of faith. As an adamant non-believer, in fact, Johannes strives simply to elevate himself above his contemporaries.



Does he go far enough? *He* seems to think so, though he never quite gets around to posing this question directly to himself. So long as he may look down on his contemporaries and lampoon their foibles, he need not acknowledge (much less address) his own failings. That he does not have faith is treated not so much as a shortcoming on his part, which would merit his or our renewed attention, but as a non-negotiable condition of his existence. He thus sidesteps an obvious line of criticism that he or someone else might pursue in evaluating his claim to “the happiness of ‘slight superiority’.”

Like the Philippians to whom Paul’s letter is addressed, Johannes is on his own. All he has to go on is his own capacity for “fear trembling,” which he is understandably inclined to measure out for himself in manageable doses. He is willing to “fear and tremble,” that is, but only to an extent and for a duration that *he* determines to be adequate. After all, what kind of God would wish for him to suffer any more than is needed to secure his salvation? To be sure, some, like Johannes’ s contemporaries, choose minimal suffering or none at all. (This is why he looks down on them.) Others, like the saints and martyrs of yore, left nothing to chance. Abraham, we know, was willing to sacrifice “his best” for his faith.

Johannes himself plots a sensible middle course between these extremes. Just as he is willing to enter the vicinity of faith, to get close enough, but no closer, to the center of its engulfing intensity, so is he prepared to “fear and tremble” just enough to secure his salvation—but no more. In the absence of an objective standard or reproducible calculus, he thus resolves to struggle more acutely, and more sincerely, than his contemporaries. If anyone from his age or generation merits salvation, he reasonably might have concluded, he will be the one. According to Kierkegaard, of course, one’s salvation is not simply a matter of playing it safe, meeting relative standards, holding reasonable beliefs, and forming sensible expectations.

But there is another problem with his appeal to a strictly comparative standard of human flourishing: He may improve his relative position either by

building himself up, which he claims with some plausibility to have done, or by tearing others down. What this means, of course, is that Johannes has an incentive to see and describe his contemporaries in the least flattering light. As we have seen, moreover, he is in an advantageous position to belittle their achievements, stereotype their customs and manners, caricature their goals and aspirations, and generally discount the intensity of their spiritual struggles. This incentive furthermore places us, his readers, in a precarious position, for we are uniquely dependent on him to provide a more-or-less accurate reckoning of his contemporaries. His claim to a position of relative superiority rests on this reckoning, as does the validity of his diagnosis of the crisis at hand. In this sense, we simply may know too much about him to yield to his attempts at flattery. His claim to relative superiority may in fact be a disguised or redirected expression of resentment, just as Nietzsche has advised us. The same may be true, as we shall see, of his suspicions of Abraham.

But what of his apparent campaign to recommend the faith of Abraham as a remedy for the torpor that grips his dispassionate contemporaries? What is the point of re-acquainting his readers with the prospect of a “teleological suspension of the ethical” and an “absolute duty to God”?

Johannes may be something of a throwback, but he is no fool. He has no intention of forfeiting the safety and security of the ethical sphere for the terrifying uncertainty of a religious sphere in which an inscrutable deity issues adventitious commands. He does not possess the faith of Abraham, as he repeatedly tells us, and he is furthermore determined never to do so. Although he recommends that his readers reconsider the faith of Abraham, he does so not because he wants or expects them to aspire to it, much less achieve it. His aim, unlike his rhetoric, is far more modest: He believes that a reconsideration of the biblical story will endow his best readers with sufficient passion, vitality, and urgency to secure their comparative advantage over their contemporaries. In fact, I wish to suggest, Johannes aims both to draw our attention to the faith of Abraham *and* to place it off limits. He does this, moreover, for *us*, his favored readers, so that we may be enlivened but not endangered by our consideration of the terrifying faith of

Abraham. As we shall see, moreover, he also does this for himself, so that we will do his bidding.

Notwithstanding its ominous and ostensibly disruptive presentation, the faith of Abraham is actually an extremely *safe* goal for Johannes to propose to his readers—or so he presumes. The setting of the goal, and its subsequent contemplation by the readers of *Fear and Trembling*, will infuse the ethical sphere with a degree of passion that is both salutary and stable. Despite Johannes's stated fears about the possibility of a "teleological suspension of the ethical," he does not really believe that his contemporaries are capable of choosing, much less sustaining, the religious obligations that he associates with Abraham. The reasonable limits of the ethical sphere will remain intact, while the ethical sphere itself will receive a welcome injection of non-threatening passion and vitality. In short, Johannes believes, he and his readers will enjoy the best of both spheres.<sup>12</sup>

Despite Johannes's rhetoric, then, the economy of his meditation on Abraham is surprisingly tame and conservative. The book *Fear and Trembling* is meant to rouse our passions, but only to a degree that is consistent with the renewed legitimacy of the ethical sphere. The psychological appeal of Johannes's meditation on Abraham is similarly conservative. Although he entertains the possibility of a precipitous leap into faith, by means of which one might accomplish a "teleological suspension of the ethical" and distinguish oneself as a "knight of faith," he does so only to stir the sluggish vitality of his readers.

This is why his imaginary journeys to the scene of Abraham's trial, which his readers are encouraged to reproduce, never reach the sacrificial summit of Mt. Moriah. As we have seen, his goal all along has been to place himself and his readers in the vicinity or neighborhood of faith, so that he and they might bask in its nourishing intensity without taking on the burden of its attendant obligations. So although Johannes urges his readers to consider the faith of Abraham, he neither wants nor expects them to attain or even strive for it. He wishes simply to

pique their interest, to quicken their pulse, and to race their passions. That is all. Once he has succeeded in enlivening his readers, or so we are meant to believe, Johannes will return Abraham to the hazy, quasi-mythical oblivion where he ordinarily resides.

The important point of comparison is this: The ascetic priest and the knight of morality both believe that their social roles authorize them to serve as diagnosticians and healers. Each responds to a situation of crisis by prescribing a potentially toxic remedy to an imperiled (and impaired) clientele. Each does so, moreover, fully (but undeservedly) confident in his capacity to determine the optimal dose of the remedy he prescribes. Each does so, finally, while operating under the unacknowledged burden of a conflict of interest. Just as the ascetic priest hopes to gain revenge on his sworn enemies, which leads him to mobilize the docile herd he has formed, so Johannes wishes to remove himself and his readers from the oppressive shadow of Abraham. Owing to this conflict of interest, finally, each cannot help but undo his good works on behalf of his clientele.

#### **Part Four: The Return of the Priest**

As we know, Nietzsche's account of the slave revolt in morality does not end with his explanation of the formation of the herd. The development of the herd satisfied the most immediate need facing the priest and the slaves—namely, the need to determine a more productive use and direction for the slaves' *ressentiment*. But the priest also had needs of his own, which he endeavored to satisfy, albeit indirectly, by mobilizing the herd.<sup>13</sup>

In forming the herd, we recall, the priest restricted himself to his "innocent" methods for relieving the suffering of his followers. These methods, which included the therapies associated with almsgiving, neighbor love, and rote mechanical tasks, required the priest to fashion the simplest of pretexts: His followers suffered because they *deserved* to suffer, owing to deeds they had done in the past, deeds for which they had not yet fully atoned. As we have seen, moreover, this simple pretext secured the conditions under which some herd

members came to enjoy “the happiness of ‘slight superiority’,” which was a product (or by-product) of the slave’s redirected *ressentiment*.

In mobilizing the herd, however, the priest would need to craft a more ambitious pretext, which, he surmised, would need to deliver a more memorable experience of happiness. The priest thus returned to the herd and intervened once again.<sup>14</sup> The pretext he fashioned was both familiar and daring. He once again assured his followers that they suffered because they deserved to suffer, which once again allowed them to accept their suffering as meaningful. This time around, however, the priest convinced them that they suffered not on account of anything they had done, but on account of what (or who) they were: *sinner*s.

The secret of the priest’s success thus lay in his invention of *sin*, which Nietzsche describes as “the greatest event so far in the history of the sick soul” (GM III:20). This invention authorized his followers to search within themselves for the real or root cause of their suffering. Scanning their barren souls with renewed gusto, they not only encountered the broken promises and unpaid debts that were familiar to them, but also discovered the flawed and fallen nature that explained the persistence of their broken promises and unpaid debts. At the urging of the priest, that is, his followers realized that their very nature was corrupt, *precisely* to the extent that it was contaminated by primal instincts, bestial appetites, predatory urges, and animal vitality. With the help of the priest, that is, his followers detected within themselves an animal nature so flawed and defective that only divine sacrifice would provide adequate recompense (GM III:20).

The priest subsequently deputized his followers, urging them to punish, tame, and eradicate their animal nature wherever and whenever it reared its ugly head. In doing so, of course, they once again directed their toxic *ressentiment* inward, though now with far greater force and intensity, and with no concern whatsoever for their own physiological wellbeing. Now availing himself of the “guilty” methods available to him for relieving the pain of his followers, the priest undertook to excite in them the “orgy of feeling” [*Ausschweifung des Gefühls*]

that is reserved for those who know themselves to be guilty (GM III:19). In exchange for regarding themselves as sinners and policing their animal urges, they were treated by the priest to an *ecstatic* experience of relief:

To wrench the human soul from its moorings, to immerse it in terrors, ice, flames, and raptures to such an extent that it is liberated from all petty displeasure, gloom and depression as by a flash of lightning...(GM III:20)

This is strong medicine, and we should be mindful of the severity of its side- and after-effects. The sick will be made sicker as a result, their nervous systems shattered in the process. Yet Nietzsche is quick to point out that the priest prescribes this medicine only with a “good conscience,” and only because he deems it “indispensable” to his efforts to maintain the herd (GM III:20).<sup>15</sup>

Unbeknownst to his followers, they were mobilized in the process, programmed to wreak havoc on all those who enjoyed or flaunted or even displayed their animal vitality. Of primary interest to the priest was the herd’s orchestrated assault on his sworn enemies, those knightly nobles who had ordered him to mind the slaves in the first place.<sup>16</sup> With the blessing of the priest, and armed with a freshly minted morality of their own, his followers made it their business to hector the knightly nobles and apprise them of their resident evil. Over the course of what may have been years or decades or even centuries, the knightly nobles came to see themselves as *evil*, and precisely to the extent that they indulged their predatory impulses and appetites. As the knightly nobles became self-critical, hesitant, unsure, and self-divided, the priest claimed his revenge.

As Nietzsche allows, in fact, the nobles blundered most egregiously in their habitual failure to familiarize themselves with the tendencies and predilections of the slaves (GM I:10). Accustomed to shunting onto the priest the task of managing the lower orders of society, the knightly-aristocratic nobles were oblivious to the threat posed to them, potentially, by the slaves, criminals, parasites, and outlaws who populated these lower orders. In particular, Nietzsche

explains, the knightly-aristocratic nobles remained fatally ignorant of the explosive capacity of the *ressentiment* that was accumulated by the slaves and weaponized by the priest.

The important point for the purposes of our comparison is that the ascetic priest discovered how to weaponize the *ressentiment* that he earlier had discovered how to redirect. Having done so, of course, he boosted the dosage of affect-medication that he earlier had prescribed to form the herd. Increasingly dependent on the ecstatic experiences that attended their recognition of their sinfulness, his followers were in no position to protest or complain, even though the increased dosage they craved caused them irreparable physiological damage.

### **Part Five: Resenting Abraham**

Why is the return of the priest relevant to our profile of Johannes *de silentio*? According to me, a similar development takes place in *Problema* III of *Fear and Trembling*. Having flattered his readers and curried their favor, Johannes encourages them to find moral fault with Abraham, who apparently lied to Isaac when asked about the animal they would sacrifice. Johannes proceeds in this fashion, or so I offer, because he has grown resentful of Abraham and weary of the obligation to aspire to the faith of Abraham. He thus recruits his favored readers to deliver a moral indictment that he, Johannes, cannot directly issue. If Abraham could be shown or even alleged to have mistreated Isaac, and if his faith could be presented as licensing this mistreatment, Johannes and his mates need not feel burdened by the expectation to “go further.” No longer tempted or shamed by Abraham’s achievement, they may relax into the “happiness of ‘slight superiority’” that awaits them in the revitalized ethical sphere.

Keen to cast off the role he has played thus far, that of the unworthy encomiast, Johannes finally spies an opening. As he nears what would become the conclusion of *Problema* III, he steers the narrative toward a consideration of Abraham’s famous promise of divine providence (*Gen.* 22:8). His pretext for doing so is reasonable enough, even if other motives are also in evidence. As we

know, he has attempted in the *Problemata* to isolate the faith of Abraham by experimentally modeling him on the “knight of faith.” If Abraham could be shown to fit the evolving profile of the “knight of faith,” or so Johannes supposes, we finally might come to understand Abraham in the fullness of his faith.<sup>17</sup> An obvious impediment to this approach, however, is Johannes’ insistence that the “knight of faith” is always radically alone in his faith and unable to communicate with mortal others. If Abraham was in fact a “knight of faith,” then it cannot be the case that he spoke to anyone, even if the biblical verses indicate otherwise. As a result, Johannes must take care to nullify or explain away Abraham’s promise of divine providence.

Johannes thus returns our attention to the exchange recorded at *Gen.* 22:8-9, where Isaac directly asks Abraham about the animal to be prepared for sacrifice. “God will provide the lamb for the burnt offering,” Abraham famously replied. Although Abraham *appears* to mislead Isaac at *Gen.* 22:8, which would suggest his indifference to the moral law, Johannes begs to differ.<sup>18</sup> In fact, he maintains, Abraham spoke “ironically,” in a “divine language,” and in a “strange tongue” (*FT* 118-19).<sup>19</sup> According to Johannes, that is, Abraham did not mislead Isaac, for the utterance in question in fact conveyed nothing at all. Despite all appearances, then, Abraham did not really say to Isaac what the biblical narrator records at *Gen.* 22:8. As such, Abraham did not conceal his aims from Isaac, for speaking ironically is not to be confused with speaking untruthfully.<sup>20</sup>

Here we should note, moreover, that Johannes has managed to score a double victory with his creative interpretation of the biblical verses in question:

- 1) Abraham did not speak, which means that we may continue in our efforts to measure his fit to the profile of the “knight of faith”; and
- 2) Because Abraham did not speak, his promise of divine providence cannot be construed as having concealed his aims from Isaac. As a result, no “ethical justification” of this concealment, as specified in the title of *Problema* III, is needed. The fact that Johannes can provide no such justification thus becomes irrelevant.<sup>21</sup>



Abraham is thus cleared of all charges, albeit on the strength of a dubious technicality. Although Johannes succeeds thereby in salvaging his campaign to fit Abraham to the profile of the “knight of faith,” however, he shows little interest in continuing this thought-experiment. In fact, he appears to be finished, at least for now.

I have surveyed elsewhere the various difficulties involved in this far-fetched appeal to the *irony* of Abraham.<sup>22</sup> For our present purposes, let us acknowledge the ulterior motives that are likely to have influenced this appeal. As we have seen, Johannes’ concern with the biblical verses in question is neither gratuitous nor outrageous. In light of his interest in modeling Abraham on the “knight of faith,” in fact, he *must* address what appears to be a genuine, substantive exchange between Abraham and Isaac. We may wonder, however, why he adopts this particular approach to the task of addressing their exchange.

His decision to linger over the biblical verses in question affords him the opportunity to communicate indirectly with his favored readers, those whom he has taken care to flatter and cajole throughout his narration of *Fear and Trembling*. What he communicates to them, I submit, is his sense of moral outrage, which may or may not be genuine, pertaining to Abraham’s promise of divine providence. As we know, he goes so far as to remind his readers of what Abraham *might* have said in response to Isaac’s question: *You are the one intended* (FT 118).<sup>23</sup> Without saying so, that is, Johannes all but accuses Abraham of a gratuitous and potentially cruel prevarication. Johannes eventually exonerates Abraham, as we have seen, but not before sowing the seeds of distrust in the minds of his favored readers.

Why would Johannes proceed in this fashion? As I have suggested, Johannes has grown resentful of Abraham and weary of praising his prodigious faith. So long as Abraham stands before him as an exemplar of faith, there always will be more that he might (and should) be expected to do to secure the terms of his salvation. In other words, Johannes is now hoist on his own petard: Having urged his contemporaries to reconsider the faith of Abraham, precisely so

that they would appreciate the spiritual poverty of their strictly ethical existence, he now labors under the burden of a similar estimation of his own life. So long as he feels spiritually inadequate in comparison to Abraham, he cannot take full advantage of the infusion of passion and vitality that he has prescribed. Like his contemporaries, of course, he *could* respond to this provocation by resolving to follow in the extra-ethical footsteps of Abraham. Like them, however, he has no intention of doing so.

The problem Johannes encounters here is that his renewed attention to the faith of Abraham has served its purpose, allowing him to assert his “slight superiority” vis-à-vis his contemporaries, and it has exhausted its utility. Johannes is done with Abraham and now wishes to return him to his former position of obscure, non-threatening, ceremonial significance. Simply put, Johannes needs Abraham to be gone so that he can enjoy the comparative advantage he has arranged for himself and his mates in the ethical sphere. So long as he feels either tempted or shamed by the faith of Abraham, he will be unable to enjoy “the happiness of ‘slight superiority’” that he has secured for himself and his favored readers. It is for this reason that he endeavors in *Problema* III to cast aspersions on Abraham’s character, focusing in particular on Abraham’s duplicitous promise of divine providence. Having exhorted his contemporaries to revisit the faith of Abraham, he now needs his favored readers to return Abraham to his customary (and mostly harmless) position of merely ceremonial significance.

The difficulty he faces is that he cannot come right out and directly accuse Abraham of lying. Doing so would be contrary to the encomia he has issued and, therefore, destructive of the renewed passion and vitality these encomia were meant to excite. As a knight of morality, moreover, he is obliged to praise Abraham and maintain the appearance of his greatness, as he has done consistently throughout *Fear and Trembling*. At the same time, however, he enjoys sufficient latitude to defend Abraham while also calling into question his character. And this is precisely what he attempts to accomplish as he nears the end of *Problema* III. Much as the ascetic priest contrives to mobilize his formerly

docile herd, so Johannes attempts to turn his favored readers against Abraham, trading on and amplifying the suspicions they already harbor with respect to his journey to Mt. Moriah.

It is no coincidence that Johannes encourages his best readers to identify sympathetically with the victimized Isaac, whose treatment throughout this “trial” is difficult for anyone to justify or defend.<sup>24</sup> By focusing on the apparent mistreatment of Isaac, Johannes aims to drive a wedge between Abraham’s religious status—viz., as a divine favorite—and his ethical status—viz., as a father and caregiver. His objective in doing so is to furnish himself and his best readers with a credible pretext both for their failure to aspire to the faith of Abraham and for their resentment of anyone who dares to “go further.” Those who follow in the extra-moral footsteps of Abraham, he thus implies, do so at the expense of their ethical obligations and, possibly, of their humanity. So although Johannes and his favored readers *wish* they could “go further,” or so they will claim from the safety of the ethical sphere, they could not bear to treat others as cruelly as Abraham treated Isaac.

As presented by Johannes, the steadfast *resolve* of Abraham is the source of both his greatness and his immorality. If Abraham can be shown to have achieved his faith at the expense of his most basic ethical obligations, then Johannes and his readers may refuse, on identifiably ethical grounds, to aspire to the faith of Abraham. Having done so, they may relax into “the happiness of ‘slight superiority’” that Johannes has arranged for them in the ethical sphere. They will do so, of course, under the aegis of a self-deception or inauthenticity that Kierkegaard fears is becoming pandemic throughout late modern European culture.<sup>25</sup> While it is true that they have neither achieved nor even aspired sincerely to the faith of Abraham, the “choice” they have made—namely, to side with Isaac and hold Abraham responsible for his ethical lapse—serves to diffuse any feelings of guilt or inadequacy that otherwise might temper their enjoyment of their (merely) ethical existence. Indeed, here we are reminded of the central role played in the slave revolt in morality by the fiction of the slaves’ supposed *choice* to suffer at the hands of their oppressors. This fiction not only allowed the slaves

to experience their suffering as meaningful, but also poisoned the nobles' enjoyment of the cruelty they visited upon the slaves.

A signal advantage of this interpretation of *Problema III* is the insight it grants us into the divided office that Johannes is obliged to perform. As a knight of morality, he simultaneously must defend both Abraham *and* the moral law that Abraham is believed, in some sense, to have authorized. For the most part, to be sure, his performance of this divided office is neither constraining nor onerous. Abraham is generally, if vaguely, admirable, and few individuals are inclined to dwell for long on the ethical implications of his journey to Moriah. (As we know from the *Preliminary Expectoration*, moreover, very few preachers will encourage their congregants to examine closely Abraham's decision to offer his "best" to his God.) (FT 28) For his part, Johannes routinely praises Abraham, while judiciously stopping short of endorsing his extra-ethical allegiances. Should anyone feel called to emulate Abraham, moreover, Johannes vows to do everything in his power to head off a return trip to Moriah (FT 31-33). In other words, he is ordinarily able to strike a viable balance between praising Abraham and condoning Abraham's journey to Moriah.

When none other than Abraham is perceived to have offended the moral law, however, the burden of performing this divided office becomes nearly unbearable. Like the feckless preacher who unwittingly incited a sleepless congregant, Johannes must attempt to honor competing obligations that he simply cannot reconcile. Like the preacher, moreover, Johannes arrives at a solution that verges on the comic.<sup>26</sup> As we have seen, his defense of Abraham's "ironic" promise to Isaac not only strains credulity, but also permits him indirectly to communicate his sense of moral outrage.

In his defense of Abraham's promise of divine providence, Johannes executes the double movement that is emblematic of his station.<sup>27</sup> First, he moves decisively to defend the priority of the ethical sphere, dutifully pointing out that Abraham misled Isaac about the objective of their journey. To be sure, he forwards this allegation "dialectically," thereby distancing himself from the moral

judgment that the allegation is likely to motivate. Still, the important point here is that the knight of morality cannot let this offense pass without comment. In lingering over the particulars of Abraham's promise of divine providence, in fact, Johannes indirectly communicates his disapproval to his best readers, who are expected in turn to issue the moral condemnation that he can only suggest. Like Tarquin the proud (*FT* 3), that is, Johannes relies on an indirect communication to order a hit. In this case, the ill-fated poppies represent Abraham, whom Johannes' best readers are meant to disavow as a moral exemplar. Thus liberated from any obligation to aspire to the faith of Abraham, he and they may partake of the "happiness of 'slight superiority'" that the revitalized ethical sphere sponsors.

Second, Johannes moves expeditiously to defend Abraham, the acknowledged progenitor of the ethical sphere, from the taint of immorality. This second movement is especially difficult for him to execute, for he must deflect the charge of immorality that *he* has prompted his readers to bring against Abraham. Johannes responds, as we have seen, by appealing in lawyerly fashion to the *irony* of Abraham, which, he explains, ensures that Isaac received as gibberish the words recorded by the narrator of *Genesis*. A further difficulty, of course, is that Johannes is no longer inclined to defend Abraham. In order to enjoy the "happiness of 'slight superiority'" that he has arranged for himself and his favored readers, he needs a convincing pretext for his refusal to "go further." The pretext of choice, as we have seen, is the assertion that the faith of Abraham licensed his cruel treatment of Isaac.

We should not be surprised, that is, if his defense of Abraham (i.e., his second movement) is noticeably less elegant, and decidedly less persuasive, than his defense of the ethical sphere (i.e., his first movement). Like the ascetic priest, we know, Johannes chafes under the limitations of the social role to which he has been assigned. The explanation he proffers is thus meant to serve double duty: With a single stroke, he both defends Abraham and enjoins his favored readers to dismiss Abraham as a moral monster.

A final advantage of this interpretation lies in the sense it allows us to make of the logical and narrative devolution that faults the concluding paragraphs of *Problema* III. Simply put, the double-movement performed by Johannes overwhelms and deranges the investigation underway in *Problema* III. Rather than celebrate or leverage his successful defense of Abraham, who did not deceive Isaac after all, Johannes effectively abandons the project of fitting Abraham to the profile of the “knight of faith.”<sup>28</sup> Ostensibly concerned to determine if it was ethically defensible for Abraham to conceal his undertaking from Sarah, Eliezer, and Isaac, Johannes instead contrives to change the subject. He ventures no answer to the question he poses to himself, and he concludes *Problema* III by revisiting the conclusion of *Problema* II (120). In his haste to steer *Problema* III toward something resembling a proper conclusion, moreover, he appeals gratuitously to the all-seeing, tear-counting God of Matthew’s Gospel, as if his readers would need to be reminded of this God’s panoptic interest in them.<sup>29</sup>

## Conclusion

By way of closing, let us acknowledge what might be called the *social utility* of resentment. As we have seen, the “happiness of ‘slight superiority’” will content Johannes and his readers only if they are relieved of any temptation or requirement to “go further.” Otherwise, their delight in looking down on their contemporaries will be dampened, or counterbalanced, by their palpable failure to achieve faith in their own right. Rather than compare themselves to distant, enigmatic figures like Abraham, which invariably would dilute their experience of happiness, Johannes’s readers will follow his lead and disqualify all such figures from serious consideration. Indeed, it is his duty, as a knight of morality, to hold Abraham in strategic abeyance, such that his prodigious faith is neither permanently “lost” to us, nor a distraction from our pursuit of the petty pleasures afforded us within the sprawling empire of bourgeois Christendom.

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<sup>1</sup> See Conway (2015b), pp. 403-06.

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- <sup>2</sup> All page citations from the text of *Fear and Trembling* refer to the Hong's translation and edition for Princeton University Press.
- <sup>3</sup> My attempt at building a psychological profile of Johannes *de silentio* is indebted to Mackey, pp. 45-48; Mooney (1991), pp. 13-17, 25-31, 63-69; and Garff, pp. 195-99.
- <sup>4</sup> Earlier treatments of the "knight of morality" appear in Conway (2008), pp. 183-87; Conway (2013a), pp. 31-34; and Conway (2014) pp. 29-31.
- <sup>5</sup> See Conway (2013a), pp. 40-47.
- <sup>6</sup> My citations from Nietzsche's text refer to the translation of *On the Genealogy of Morality* by Walter Kaufmann and R.J. Hollingdale for Viking Press. Roman numerals refer to the three essays of GM and the Arabic numerals refer to sections rather than pages.
- <sup>7</sup> Scheler, p. 29.
- <sup>8</sup> For instructive discussions of the role of *ressentiment* in Nietzsche's philosophy, see Scheler, pp. 27-37, 91-101; Staten, pp. 47-59; Ridley, pp. 22-30; Leiter, pp. 254-63; Janaway, pp. 99-106; and Miles, pp. 66-72.
- <sup>9</sup> Kaufmann & Hollingdale offer "agent" as their translation of the word—*Thäter*—that they earlier translated as "doer" (GM I:13). Nietzsche may mean for his readers at this point to recall his earlier discussion of the "type of human being [who] *needs* to believe in a neutral independent 'subject,' prompted by an instinct for self-preservation and self-affirmation in which every lie is sanctified" (GM I:13).
- <sup>10</sup> Following Mackey (p. 41), I take Johannes to be, or to wish to be, the pilgrim to whom he attributes the strategy of imaginatively visiting and revisiting the journey to Moriah.
- <sup>11</sup> See Conway (2003).
- <sup>12</sup> Similar observations about the complex role(s) of the ethical sphere in *Fear and Trembling* have been advanced by Mackey, pp. 47-54; Mulhall, pp. 380-87; Lippitt, pp. 168-71; Davenport, pp. 206-15; Green, pp. 167-79; Krishek, pp. 101-08; Hanson, pp. 236-43; and Conway (2015a), pp. 218-25.
- <sup>13</sup> This section draws on material that originally appeared in Conway (2013b), pp. 75-76.
- <sup>14</sup> I rely here on Ridley's important distinction between the *immanent* and *transcendent* stages of the slave revolt, pp. 41-44.
- <sup>15</sup> Here I follow Ridley, pp. 57-60; and Leiter, pp. 260-63.
- <sup>16</sup> This caretaking arrangement, and not an actual battle, is the most likely result of the escalating hostilities that Nietzsche documents at GM I:7.
- <sup>17</sup> Here I follow Lippitt, pp. 129-32.
- <sup>18</sup> Here I follow Gellman, pp. 101-04, 116-19.

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- <sup>19</sup> See Hanson, pp. 236-43.
- <sup>20</sup> I am indebted here to Mulhall, pp. 380-87; Carlisle (2010), pp. 193-95; Green, pp. 157-67; and Hanson, pp. 236-243. See also Conway (2008), pp. 185-91; and Conway (2015a), pp. 222-28
- <sup>21</sup> Here I follow Carlisle (2010), pp. 193-95.
- <sup>22</sup> See Conway (2008), pp. 179-85; and Conway (2014), pp. 44-50.
- <sup>23</sup> See Conway (2008), pp. 182-86.
- <sup>24</sup> According to Luther, for example, "Abraham does not want to torment his son with a long torture and trial. Therefore he does not yet disclose that Isaac himself must die" (pp. 112). Luther defends the entire journey to Moriah as guiding father and son toward the overarching, and apparently needed, realization that "death is life" (pp. 118-19). See also Carlisle, pp. 51-55.
- <sup>25</sup> See, for example, Perkins (1984); Pattison (1999); Pattison (2002); and (Conway 2015b).
- <sup>26</sup> See Lippitt, pp. 35-38; and Conway (2013a), pp. 38-43.
- <sup>27</sup> I would go so far as to suggest that the "double-movement" he famously assigns to the "knight of faith" is in fact an idealized projection of his own experience of self-division. In the person of the "knight of faith," we find, Johannes' anxiety-producing experience of self-division is healed, transfigured, and rendered meaningful. When Johannes endeavors to describe Abraham's "double movement" (*FT* 119), he is actually describing his own situation. I am indebted here to Gellman, pp. 74-81; see also Conway (2008), pp. 182-86.
- <sup>28</sup> See Conway (2014), pp. 48-50.
- <sup>29</sup> I am indebted here to Derrida, pp. 80-81; and Stern, pp. 38-40. See also Conway (2008), pp. 187-93.

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